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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an experience that illustrates how change can be facilitated through the cooperation of elementary school principals, college supervisors, and interested classroom teachers. In the change strategy used, the elementary school principal and the college supervisor combined forces and served as change agents. The school principal recruited teachers and involved the college supervisor in testing the learning center model of instruction, while the teachers worked with the principal and supervisor to introduce learning centers in their class and to work with student teachers throughout the school year. The learning center model includes classroom interest centers that enable several activities to occur simultaneously. Teachers who were using learning centers were in their own section of the building. The teachers were involved from the beginning and took an active part in determining how the learning centers could be adapted to their classrooms. Seminars were held with cooperating and student teachers and provided teachers with additional information to meet their needs and with a feeling of support. Classes were also held giving university credit and focused on problems outlined by teachers. According to the author, this experience indicates that with an interested principal and college personnel who are willing to work in the schools, new innovations can be effectively tested under the practical conditions of classroom teaching with benefit to both the public schools and the college. (PD)

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STUDENT TEACHING AS A FACILITATOR OF CHANGE

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After getting acquainted with her students at the beginning of a school year, a teacher outlines her problems and challenges. "Due to the lack of reading skills, the children had problems in reading instructions and working independently. Most of the children had very low self esteem and felt a constant need for teacher direction and approval. Even with simple materials, their reaction was one of 'I can't unless the teacher is here.' There are many discipline problems and the reaction of students to difficulty is generally physical. The students have poor study habits and lack the ability to work independently in any classroom area. Students feel no responsibility for their own learning."

Does the above paragraph sound rather typical? We find as we talk with elementary teachers that while the list of problems change the magnitude of the problems which teachers perceive is almost overwhelming. The purpose of this article, however, isn't to say "Ain't it Awful" but to share a success experience.

The same teacher makes the following comment at the end of the school year. "The results in the classroom were excellent. The students' interest picked up and tests showed success in achievement. The students began to assume responsibility and were able to make more realistic commitments. The fighting and absentee problems decreased. The students showed that

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they felt the classroom belonged to them and they worked for its success. The change in the children was remarkable, but also I saw a great change in myself. For years I had taught as the benevolent dictator. I believe I was a good teacher and I had generally happy students; however, looking back I was too much a part of the students' discipline and learning. I taught them to need me more than they needed themselves. When I joined with them in planning and they shared in the responsibility their growth was superior to my previous classes and I enjoyed myself more."

What had happened to the teacher quoted above? She was part of a cooperative project between a department of education and an elementary school to test an innovative practice (learning centers) and to serve as a cooperating teacher. The project received no outside funding nor was it part of a research project. Rather the experience serves as an illustration of how change can be facilitated through the cooperation of elementary school principals, college supervisors, and interested classroom teachers.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL AND COLLEGE SUPERVISOR AS CHANGE AGENTS

In the change strategy which we used, the elementary school principal and the college supervisor combined forces and served as change agents. The school principal took the initiative to recruit teachers and to involve the college supervisor in testing the learning center model of instruction as developed by Marie Hughes and her associates at the University of Arizona.[1] The initial strategy was for teachers who were interested in experimenting with learning centers to work with the principal and college supervisor to introduce learning centers in their

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[1]Marie M. Hughes and associates, "The Tucson Early Education Model," mimeographed, University of Arizona, 1969.

class and to work with student teachers throughout the school year.

The learning center model of instruction is a complex model that has been extensively tested. The classroom organization of the model consists of behavioral settings or interest centers so that several activities occur simultaneously in the classroom. Most teacher directed instruction is done in small groups and pupils learn to accept increasing amounts of responsibility for their own learning. Because of the number of activities going on in the classroom, student teachers were especially valuable to the regular classroom teacher.

Learning centers were not forced on the faculty but the principal presented the idea and asked for volunteers who were interested in experimenting. Out of a faculty of approximately 20 teachers, four agreed to try learning centers in their room the first year.

In terms of change strategy, the change agent (the school principal in this case) became aware of an educational innovation and presented this idea to teachers who were willing to test the learning center system under practical classroom conditions. The college supervisor provided student teachers and his support to those teachers who were willing to experiment. The student teachers provided assistance to the teachers in developing new curriculum and also had the advantage of working with teachers who were experimenting with a new instructional model. Student teachers also provided a legitimate reason for a college person to be working with a school without the need for outside funding. Those teachers interested in using learning centers were all placed by the principal in one section of the building both for the purpose of providing support to one another and so other teachers who didn't want to try centers, but were interested in how centers worked, could easily observe.

SCHOOL WITHIN A SCHOOL

At this point in the change process, a school within a school had been created. Teachers who were using learning centers were in their own section of the building, they were working closely with student teachers and college supervisor, and they were working as a team to develop curriculum. The rest of the school was functioning with different models of instruction but other teachers were also beginning to experiment with new ways of teaching.

Simplicity of the change strategy is evident. The change agents are involved in carrying out their roles for their respective institutions and the introduction of new practices becomes part of their role. The teachers are involved from the beginning and take an active part in determining how the innovation (learning centers in this case) can be adapted to their classrooms. The teacher, therefore, plays an active role in the use of the innovation rather than merely trying out that which has been developed by someone else. Teachers are not left to experiment on their own but receive the support of the principal, the college supervisor and of one another. Three factors seem of significance here: (1) the teacher must have an adequate understanding of the new practice, (2) the teachers must feel that the new idea helps them to solve some of their pressing problems, and (3) the teacher must feel he has the support and help necessary to successfully use the new practice.

SUPPORT AND CONTINUATION OF CHANGE

The fact that a new practice is started in a school doesn't mean that it will continue. We used several methods to support and extend the initial innovation and to help teachers modify and continue to grow. Since all of the teachers using centers had student teachers, it was possible for the cooperating teachers to be free at selected times

during the school day to attend workshops and talk about problems. Seminars were held with cooperating teachers, student teachers, and with both groups combined. These seminars were planned to meet the stated needs of teachers and included demonstrations, lectures, slide presentations and just work time to develop curriculum materials. The seminars were directed by the college supervisor, the school principal, and outside resource people from the university. The seminars provided teachers with additional information but perhaps even more important with a feeling of support and "specialness." One experienced teacher remarked that the school became for the first time "an exciting place to work."

Classes were also held giving university credit and focused upon problems outlined by the teachers. A class was offered during the first year in the development of instructional materials and two classes were given the third year on the use of learning centers. The first class was taught by the college supervisor and the next two were team taught by the college supervisor and the school principal who was also made an adjunct instructor in the college of education. The merit of the courses was mainly the fact that they were taught at the school by people who were familiar with the problems which the teachers were facing. The courses were therefore problem centered and relevant to the perceived needs of the teachers.

During the third year, one of the teachers moved into the role of college supervisor and the person who had served as college supervisor continued in a supporting role, teaching inservice classes and working with cooperating teachers. During the three years in which the project was in operation, the number of faculty members using learning centers grew from four to twelve, over a thousand teachers and college students

visited the school, some one hundred teachers had attended workshops on learning centers and approximately one hundred student teachers had been trained in classrooms using the learning center approach. The teachers who participated in the activity over the three years felt successful and became advocates of learning centers. The change strategy worked to the extent that an innovation was tested and modified over a three year period under regular classroom conditions and using only those materials furnished by the school district.

STEPS OF THE CHANGE STRATEGY

The change strategy used is a general strategy used in several studies of the diffusion of innovative practices.[2] The following general steps were followed: (1) New ideas are developed through research and study. (2) A person knowledgeable about new practices works with interested teachers to help them try the new practice in their classroom. It is important that the innovation not be forced on teachers. Teachers need to see the innovation as something that will help them solve their problems and they must take an active role in modifying the innovation to fit their personal style of teaching. (3) New ideas are tested under practical conditions by regular classroom teachers. Teachers working with the innovation work as a team and provide support to each other. (4) Other teachers who are interested observe the results of the new practices. (5) The change agent (school principal and college supervisor) serve as resource persons. The change agents must be willing to work with teachers to solve problems not merely tell teachers how to proceed. Where applicable ways of working should

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[2]Everett M. Rogers, Diffusion of Innovations. New York: The Free Press, 1962.

be demonstrated in the classroom. (6) Results are shared with interested teachers and those who are willing to try the innovation become members of the experimental group.

Our experience indicates that with an interested principal and college personnel who are willing to work in the schools new innovations can be effectively tested under the practical conditions of classroom teaching with benefit to both the public schools and the college. Teachers are responsive to changes which they believe in and which help them teach more effectively.